A Child Serving Time on the Outside

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To all the people who made the Support for Kids of Incarcerated Parents program successful, we express our sincere gratitude and appreciation.

. . . to the Communities Foundation of Texas that, with the Hogg Foundation, provided generous financial support and genuine concern for the children of incarcerated parents and

. . . to the staff at the Federal Correctional Institution in Fort Worth, Texas, for its support and encouragement during the implementation of SKIP.

A special appreciation goes to the inmates who worked so faithfully alongside of us to help these children and to those who were able to share their stories with us.

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FOREWORD

The last place I expected to find the most warm, inviting playroom I had ever seen was in a prison. But that is exactly what I found when I opened the door of the Children's Center at the Federal Correctional Institution in Fort Worth for the first time. Since that first visit, I have come to view those occasions on which I sit on a little chair and hear about all the activities of Parents and Children Together (PACT) and Support for Kids of Incarcerated Parents (SKIP) as among my favorite site visits.

PACT was begun on Mother's Day, 1984, at the Federal Correctional Institution, modeled after a program in Pleasanton, California. Recognizing the fact that many adult prisoners are also spouses and parents, the program creators sought to design an environment as well as the opportunity for inmates to continue in those other roles. Indeed, the program has actually improved both the parenting skills of many of the incarcerated parents and the relationships with their children.

Once PACT was under way, the board members and the program director began to see that there was a need to do additional work with just the children. Children especially suffer from a parent's incarceration, not understanding what has happened, what prison is like, or what this change in their lives means for their future. Out of this recognition grew the idea for SKIP. And at this point the Hogg Foundation became involved. The first grant to SKIP was made in September 1985, and a second-year grant followed in 1986. The contact with children has increased dramatically during that time. In 1985, children made over 1000 visits to the Center. In 1986, 800 children made nearly 3,000 visits.

In the following pages, Debra Key, PACT and SKIP Director, and Gloria Eyres, Assistant Dean of Criminal Justice at The University of Texas at Arlington, provide an overview of what imprisonment means for both children and parents and how programs like PACT and SKIP can provide, as two parents expressed it, "a special place for the best of times during the worst of times."

Through the years, many of the programs and organizations with which the Foundation has become involved have expressed their appreciation with plaques and formal, framed statements. These gifts hang throughout the offices of the Foundation staff members. My favorite of all these "thank yous" is the one that hangs in my office. It is no wood or brass or parchment. Rather, it is an inexpensive frame containing a photograph of six smiling children holding a big bright banner saying thanks. And I wouldn't trade my picture of the SKIP kids for any plaque around.

Marion Tolbert Coleman
Executive Assistant

A CHILD SERVING TIME ON THE OUTSIDE

A community volunteer remembers, "I'll never forget the first time I picked up nine-year-old Bobby from the airport to visit with his mother. As we drove to the prison, he huddled silently against the car door as if to pull away as far as possible. Finally he spoke without looking at me, 'Could we stop at a store? I'd like to get Mom a candy bar and a coke since all she gets to eat in there is bread and water'." Misconceptions of prison life such as Bobby's are common among children of inmates. Many fear that their parents may die in jail and they will never see them again.

Bobby is also typical in terms of the disruption that can occur in a child's life when a parent is incarcerated. When his parents were sentenced to prison on drug charges, Bobby began living with his grandparents. However, after his mother went to jail, the boy began missing school regularly and experimenting with drugs. His grandparents felt like he was out of their control. They called Bobby's mother and said that unless something was done they were going to turn Bobby over to the child welfare department. It was at this point that Parents and Children Together (PACT) became involved. The director arranged a temporary foster home for Bobby in the Fort Worth area until his mother was released from prison.

After being moved to Fort Worth, Bobby began participating in the Support for Kids of Incarcerated Parents (SKIP) program at the Federal Correctional Institution on a regular basis during visits with his mother. Within a few months a noticeable change took place in Bobby's behavior. He was less hyperactive and less demanding. He began to show respect for other people and children. When asked about the SKIP program's influence, the mother replied, "Bobby is more content and at ease with my situation here. He's so much more well-mannered. And I have learned that being with my child is far more important than all the other things in my life."

* * * * * *

The twins, Melinda and Melissa, were five when they first came into the children's center. Neither spoke a word to anyone. In fact, they crawled under the play table and watched the other children silently.

Their extreme shyness was due in large part to their living arrangements before their mother's imprisonment. Because they lived with their parents on a secluded ranch near the Mexican border, they had never been around other children, only each other, prior to the mother's arrest on drug smuggling charges. Their fright was obvious as they clung to her in their visits to the Children's Center. Eventually they began to interact with the staff members, but they wanted to be held and assured constantly. When it came time to do arts and crafts, the girls refused to do a project alone; they wanted the staff to complete the project or share it with them.

When the children's center began to offer the SKIP program, a concern emerged about the twins' situation. Everyone agreed that they needed special attention in building self-confidence. In order to get the girls involved, the counselor had to become creative. If the twins would not leave their table shelter then the program would come to them. Thus, a special meeting place was established under a table for all the five-year-olds. The children loved the idea of having their own special story place.

Over the year of their participation in the program, these beautiful little girls grew in many different ways. No longer were the twins shy with new people and other children. They learned to play with others. They were able to complete tasks and art projects on their own. They also began to speak much more frequently.

The girls' mother is released now, and they are back living on their ranch, but the contact these children made with other boys and girls in SKIP will be remembered for a lifetime.

These two anecdotes poignantly underscore the fact that when a parent is imprisoned, the life of the child on the outside can be enormously and even permanently affected. They also point up, however, the difference that a sensitive, appropriate intervention can make. A volunteer can reassure a child that his mother is not being treated inhumanely. A warm, pleasant setting, even if it is under a table, can become an environment in which major personality changes can occur. This pamphlet will not only describe the problems of incarcerated parents and their children left on the outside but also explain how one organization, Parents and Children Together (PACT), and its program, Support for the Kids of Incarcerated Parents (SKIP), are helping the children and their inmate parents best survive this traumatic experience.

How many children are affected by parental incarceration?

Accurate nationwide statistics are not available, but we do know that the prison population in this country is now over 500,000—a rate of over 200 per 100,000 U.S. residents. In addition, more than 200,000 people are held in jails on any given day. Brenda McGowan and Karen Blumenthal, authors of *Why Punish the Children?*, have estimated that 70 percent of incarcerated women are mothers, with an average of two children each.

Most of those in prison in the United States are males, the majority of whom are under 30 years old. If even 40 to 50 percent of these men are fathers of an average of two children each, it is easy to see that a disturbing number of children are tragically affected by the consequences of their parents' behavior.

Further, we know that the prison population has been rising at an alarming rate yearly. It grew by almost 68 percent between 1977 and 1985. Thus, increasing numbers of children are affected.

The children of imprisoned parents have been largely ignored by the correctional system that defines its responsibilities in terms of the

custody of inmates and the protection of society. In recent years some limited attention has been focused on these children by persons concerned with the needs of women in correctional facilities; at a number of institutions for women, programs have begun for mothers behind bars and their children. These programs include nurseries, child-oriented visiting facilities, and overnight visitation.

Even these efforts ignore the needs of children whose fathers are in prison. If any knowledge is gained at the prison in Fort Worth, it will be that problems of children whose parents are locked up are not limited to those whose mothers are in prison.

And how are these children affected?

Many of these children's problems are the typical ones of childhood and adolescence, but they are exacerbated by the enforced separation from the parent or parents. Others are a direct result of the imprisonment of the parent and the crimes he or she committed.

In a 1985 article on the children of women in prison, the *Wall Street Journal* described some of the problems and feelings expressed by these children:

> *Uprooted children often try to keep secret (or do not even know) where their mothers are. The most popular fiction used to explain away a mother's absence is that she is in the hospital. Some young children, feeling guilty, believe they must have done something bad to cause their mothers to disappear.*
>
> *. . . anger and alienation, hostility toward authority and failure in school . . . are the rule. When word about their mothers' crimes gets out, children can be cruelly teased.*
>
> *Teenagers speak of their own drug and alcohol addiction, of delinquency, and of running away. Some flirt with prison.*
>
> "Painful Parting,"
> *Wall Street Journal*, March 26, 1985,
> Freedman.

If the children know the whereabouts of their parents, they feel guilt, fear and shame associated with that knowledge. They also fear for their parents' safety because of what they have learned about prison from television and the movies.

These children may be angry with themselves or with their parents; they may be isolated from their peers because of actual or anticipated negative reactions to the parents' crime and imprisonment.

If children live with relatives or friends, their presence may be resented by reluctant caregivers who feel psychologically, physically or financially burdened by this added responsibility. Children who are in foster care or other kinds of placements may be shuffled from one home or family to another several times during the period of incarceration.

Many of the children suffer from low self-esteem and have academic and behavior problems at school. The relationship with the inmate parent is often strained because the child is angry and afraid, and the parent is nervous and guilty.

Contact with the parents at the prison can also be a frustrating, unsatisfying experience. Prison visiting areas are crowded, and correctional officers often demand adult behavior from small children, threatening to banish noisy or overactive ones from the visiting area. Thus, children may be unable to share their feelings and fears with the parents, even when or if they are able to visit.

And how are the parents affected?

Many of them say they feel helpless, frustrated, lonely, and fearful—knowing that their actions brought about this dilemma.

Studies show that the maintenance of strong family relationships is an important key to rehabilitation, and yet prisons, geared for custody and control, seldom make real efforts to maintain and strengthen families' ties. Instead, many prison policies and regulations which are intended to facilitate inmate custody and security also have the effect of restricting family and community contacts.

The problems with which these parents must cope are many and varied, but the inmates have in common the fact that trying to resolve them while in prison is difficult, frustrating, and often, unsuccessful.

An inmate mother

"When that door shut behind me, I felt so helpless. Would my children be all right while I was in here? I know every mother in here must feel the same fears I did. And my worst fears came true when my ex-husband took custody of our 12-year-old son. Being in prison is not the best place to fight a custody battle.

"His father began to sexually abuse our son. Everytime I telephoned, my son cried and begged me to help him. I didn't think I could stand it if he had to stay there. The heartache came in bunches.

"When the final custody hearing arrived, I was escorted to the courtroom by the director of the Parents and Children Together organization. When I took the stand at the hearing, I explained to the judge in detail the services offered to the inmates through the PACT organization. I described the children's center and the child-oriented atmosphere it provided, along with special programs like SKIP that help a child develop mentally and emotionally. Although visiting a mother in prison is not an ideal setting for a child, it is better than not seeing her at all. After six months of my being constantly told that I could not keep my son as long as I was in prison, the judge did the impossible and awarded my child back to me. My son was placed with a family friend until my release.

"I wish I could say our problems were over after that, but they weren't. The emotional scars are still there, and my son is having to learn all over again to trust adults. However, the SKIP program helped and continues to help him feel more secure about himself and to understand that what has happened to him was not his fault. I am so thankful that there were people here to help my son."

THE PROBLEMS

The problems with which an incarcerated parent must deal are complex and numerous.

Explaining the parent's absence

Should a child be told where the parent is? How much should the child be told? What will be the reaction of the rest of the family? Of the child's teachers and friends?

Care of the children

Only a few children are placed in foster care while their parents are in prison. Many are with grandparents, great-grandparents or other relatives whose financial resources are limited and who may be too old or ill to care properly for these children.

Disruption of the parent-child relationship

Many of the children affected by parents' imprisonment are under ten; some are even babies born in prison. Often these infants are separated from their mothers within a few weeks of birth. Parents in jail often report that their children suffer academic, emotional, and behavioral problems which they in turn directly attribute to their confinement.

Loss of control

The inmate parent must cope with the inability (or at least reduced ability) to participate in decisions about custody, school, discipline, visitation, medical care, etc. For example, the parent may have made arrangements for the care of the child during his/her incarceration only to find the arrangement cancelled by welfare authorities or spouse.

Financial problems

These include the lack of resources to bring the children for visits as well as the financial hardships on members of the family who may be caring for the children during the parents' imprisonment.

Child custody

As the earlier story of one imprisoned mother points out, the battle for a parent to maintain custody is an uphill battle even when the nonimprisoned parent is clearly not fit to parent. Moreover, in order for a parent to maintain custody there must be a person on the outside who is willing to care for the child until the inmate's release.

Lack of parenting skills and/or coping skills

Discipline, nutrition, child development, birth control, budgeting, lack of self-confidence about the parenting role—all these needs and more have been identified as significant among parents in prison.

The arrest

The children may have been present at the time of arrest. They may resent authority because it was authority figures who took the parents away. Many law enforcement agencies do not have policies on the arrest of parents with children, whether or not the children are present at the time of arrest. Many arrested mothers are not asked whether they have children nor are they given an opportunity to make arrangements for their care.

Visitation

Visiting facilities are security-oriented rather than child-oriented and do not allow normal, relaxed interaction between parent and child. Visiting areas are often crowded and noisy, and conditions are difficult for adult visitors, much less children. In many institutions physical barriers separate inmates and visitors, preventing contact between parents and children. Parents confined to an institution may refuse to allow their children to visit rather than subject them to such negative aspects of visitation. Letters, however, are not sufficient for contact, particularly if the child is young, and phone calls, which must be made collect by the inmate, are expensive, awkward, and still insufficient.

Release

Regaining custody, finding suitable and affordable housing where children are accepted, solving the problems which led to the imprisonment of the parent in the first place, and re-establishing the relationship with the child are all among the potential problems facing a newly released parent.

PACT—A PROGRAM MODEL

Parents and Children Together began operation on Mother's Day 1984 when the children's center officially opened at the Federal Correctional Institution in Fort Worth, Texas. PACT would not have happened at all without the supportive FCI administrative staff. In 1983, the staff along with inmates and community volunteers began work on plans for a program that would offer new hope to parents incarcerated at FCI, Fort Worth. This group later developed into the PACT board of directors and had as their main goal the strengthening of family bonds between inmates and their children.

The Federal Correctional Institution at Fort Worth was an ideal setting for the implementation of this program. The institution is a minimum security facility designed like a campus and housing approximately 900 inmates, both male and female. The majority of the inmate population at FCI have been convicted on drug charges or for white collar crimes (tax evasion, embezzlement, fraud, etc.). In this setting, PACT became the second parent/child program of its kind in a federal prison and the first to include fathers. The PACT board of directors provided direction and leadership in the development of the three program areas of Parents and Children Together: the children's center, education, and social service.

The children's center

The children's center was established with a small grant provided by the Federal Bureau of Prisons. The center was designed as a child-oriented visiting facility. It has a warm, inviting atmosphere that encourages positive interaction between parent and child during a child's visit to the institution. The center provides activities in which families can participate such as table games, arts and crafts, and books to read. Inmate volunteers help staff the center along with one full-time paid community staff person.

Parent education classes

PACT offers weekly parenting classes to inmate parents. Topics range from child development, discipline, and nutrition to suicide and sexual abuse. Volunteers from local community agencies and colleges have been invaluable in providing these programs free of charge.

No one is born a good parent. Parenting is something everyone learns from the type of parenting received while growing up. For a lot of prisoners, the classes offer a chance to learn parenting skills for the first time.

Social service

The third area of PACT, social service, was planned to serve as a link between the parent at the institution and the community resources on the outside. Community volunteers provide transportation and housing for children visiting from across the state or country. The professional staff offer assistance in obtaining permanent placement for a child when needed.

An inmate volunteer

"In the past three months that I have been involved in the children's center, I have seen and learned a lot about relationships. I find it important to have such programs available to the inmates and their children. SKIP is an extremely positive group. It gets parents involved in activities with their children. I devote a lot of my time to the children's center and can acknowledge the fact SKIP works! Sharing moments of happiness with families in the center has given me great pleasure. Not many children get the attention they need. When they do receive it, it is so wonderful to see the smiles and sparkles in their eyes, knowing they are enjoying themselves, if only for awhile."

A SKIP activity is the fastest way to get a parent and child involved in positive relating. It also may serve as a start to a new relationship with a child while the parent is incarcerated.

Another volunteer revealed, "In the short time of my involvement with the children as an inmate volunteer, I have seen a side come out which I honestly thought could never exist within me. The side is a loving, caring, and understanding person I am, unlike the unfeeling and uncaring drug dealer I was."

With all three areas in operation, PACT began to see a definite improvement in the inmates' relationship with their children who were involved in the program. A family no longer had to be torn apart and permanently damaged by a parent's incarceration. PACT was also beginning to receive greater approval from correctional staff at FCI who noticed the changes.

It became, however, more apparent while working with families in all three areas of PACT that special attention needed to be given to the children while the parents are in prison. A parent locked up in a penal facility is unable to deal effectively with a child's problems due to lack of control and/or understanding. Out of this need the SKIP program originated. Special support groups for these children allow PACT to help the people who hurt the most while parents are in prison—the children doing time on the outside.

* * * * * *

"I want to tell you how much I like the children's center. It has been so good for the family. In the center we get to play games and talk about problems, and we get to do things together. I'm glad there is a children's center because it makes me very close to my mom."

10-year-old boy

SUPPORT FOR KIDS OF INCARCERATED PARENTS

PACT received support for the SKIP project through grants from the Hogg Foundation for Mental Health and the Communities Foundation of Texas. The Bureau of Prisons was also interested in the SKIP project and in researching results from the program. SKIP is the first program of its kind to focus on the feelings and behaviors of children with parents in prison.

With these sources of support behind them, the PACT Director and the Assistant Supervisor of Education at the Federal Correctional Institution began to develop the SKIP program.

Support Groups in a Correctional Facility

It became SKIP's goal to help children with parents in prison develop positive mental attitudes toward themselves and others. The goal also included helping the children cope with their emotions concerning their parents' incarceration by providing them with a more realistic view of prison life.

Age requirements

The SKIP support groups are offered to all children between the ages of 5 and 17 years who have parents confined to the Federal Correctional Institution in Fort Worth, Texas.

Objectives

After examining the needs of these children, it was decided that the SKIP support groups would be designed to assist children in four basic problem areas:

- ★ Building self-concept
- ★ Developing decision-making skills
- ★ Understanding the concept of family and friends
- ★ Understanding prison life.

Group structure

SKIP support groups are held in the children's center during regular institutional visiting hours. This timing allows the inmate parents to participate in some of the group activities. The children are divided into groups according to age categories:

Kindergarten—1st grade
2nd grade—3rd grade
4th grade—6th grade
7th grade—12th grade

Meetings of each category are scheduled seven times per week. Group sessions are facilitated by community staff and inmate volunteers. Each group session is 30 minutes to an hour long. Activities include role-playing, story-telling, arts and crafts, noncompetitive games, puppet shows and filmstrips for discussion.

Volunteers

Two types of volunteers are used in the SKIP program, inmate volunteers and community volunteers. Inmates who offer to participate must attend a minimum of eight hours in PACT parenting courses, be approved by the institutional staff and then be approved by the children's center staff. Once approved, an inmate must attend a four-hour orientation on the children's center and SKIP groups.

Community volunteers come to the program through the PACT Board of Directors and local churches. Volunteers interested in providing transportation and housing for visiting children make application to PACT and are screened by the project director. Community volunteers who are interested in working in the children's center must also go through a four-hour orientation.

Supervision

A part-time counselor is responsible for the daily implementation of the SKIP program. The counselor serves as the primary group facilitator, coordinator and supervisor of all inmate and community volunteers. The counselor is also responsible for maintaining individual case files on each child, evaluating family participation, and arranging transportation when needed.

Enrollment

Children are enrolled into a SKIP support group upon visiting the children's center. Parent and child newsletters are sent out to alert readers to the times that SKIP is offered and to various activities that are available to the parents and the children. By including instructions for craft articles which can then be sent to parents, the children's newsletter also keeps children involved who are not able to participate in SKIP regularly due to travel distance.

Evaluation

An intake form and evaluation are completed on each child and an individual case file kept. This file contains the initial intake form, evaluation, record of attendance, and ten-hour evaluation. The latter includes goals and objectives for both parent and child as determined by the PACT Director, SKIP counselor, and inmate parent. Separate files are maintained on transportation provided for the children.

★★★★★★

"We want to go back to the center. The people there help us to get our mom back. We love the center and we want our mom. We need to do something to have our mom back. She isn't theirs. SKIP lets us forget about the sad things and have fun."

6-year-old girl

An inmate father

"Before I came to FCI I had trouble dealing with my six-year-old stepdaughter. She was angry and jealous of me. Frequent arguments with her mother over how to discipline our daughter were followed by even worse problems. I went to child training classes to learn how to set boundaries with her. Her mother and I attended counseling for nine months to save our four-year-old relationship. Over time, my relationship with my stepdaughter began to improve.

"Then when I was sentenced to three years in prison on drug charges, our daughter reverted back to the behavior she displayed when I first met her. Once again she was abandoned. She would not let me hug her. She would spit at me and throw tantrums if I tried to help her with anything. She started sleeping with her mother again and was having difficulty with school and her playmates.

"Shortly after I arrived at the Federal Correctional Institution I enrolled my daughter in the SKIP program. After about two months I became a PACT volunteer and was able to resume the play therapy program that my wife and I had started before my imprisonment. Our daughter began to respond to the SKIP group activities immediately. She was able to see that I loved her and that she was not alone. Her behavior at school got better and she no longer had to dominate her playmates.

"I am grateful to the SKIP program for restoring our relationship. I am sure that without the program my family would have not lasted through this traumatic experience. The children and spouses of inmates suffer tremendous damage from the imprisonment of their loved ones. PACT and SKIP help heal those wounds and help people have a better chance to survive as a family."

SUCCESSFUL INTERVENTION

In the short time Support for Kids of Incarcerated Parents has been in existence the program has touched the lives of many children, staff, volunteers and parents. SKIP provides children with a clearer understanding of prison life and offers appropriate outlets for expressing and acknowledging their feelings and emotions.

The Federal Correctional Institution of Fort Worth benefited from SKIP because inmates who are not worried about their children or afraid for them are better prisoners with fewer problems. The children's center relieves the visiting room officers from having to spend all their time monitoring the children. When the children's center became overcrowded, the institutional staff showed its support of SKIP by giving PACT an outside play area for group activities.

Community volunteers who gave their time to provide transportation and housing for these kids said that they benefited. The volunteers made it possible for families to visit together that otherwise could not because the children needed transportation or a place to stay if they lived out of town. The volunteers pick the children up at the airport or at home and take them to the prison to visit. Volunteers provide room in their own homes for the out-of-town children to stay overnight.

SKIP also involves the inmates who do not receive visits from their children. Being a group leader or inmate volunteer for SKIP provides an opportunity for a parent to keep up with his or her own child's development by being around another child of a similar age. It also helps the parents to understand the problems their children may be experiencing. By listening to the children in SKIP groups express their feelings and fears, they are better able to respond to their children.

Children with parents in prison remain in a high risk category for emotional, mental and behavioral problems. Children are hurt, angry, scared and sometimes rebellious when the parents go to jail. By providing groups that build self-esteem, decision-making skills and the concept of family, the risk that these children may become incarcerated themselves is reduced.

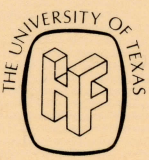
At the end of the first year, 325 children were enrolled in the SKIP program with a total of 2,743 visits to the children's center. The program was implemented without any problems and continues to be a model for other federal and state correctional facilities.

John's story

"When I arrived at the Federal Correctional Institution a few months ago I was frustrated with myself and the situation that I had placed my family in. To make matters worse, my oldest son, who was seven, had dyslexia. Before my arrival at FCI, I had helped him with his school work and studies every evening. When I went to prison for lying on loan applications, my oldest son became very cold to me and withdrawn during our visits. I knew he felt like I had deserted him and had turned my back on him. These additional family pressures on a struggling first grader were evident to me and even more obvious to his teacher.

"The first few visits were extremely difficult for my family. We had to sit in a large room and just talk. My boys, ages seven and three, would not sit still and visit. The youngest wanted to run and play and the oldest didn't say much to me at all. The visit was full of negative statements like, 'No, don't do that.' 'You need to be quiet.' My wife and I constantly sat in fear of a visit being terminated because the children could not be still.

"These visits with my family were frustrating until I heard about PACT and the SKIP program offered through the children's center. With an area geared for children and parents, we became a family again. I had the opportunity to sit on the floor and play with the boys, help them draw pictures, hug them and talk with them about things that were important to them. After a few more weeks my seven-year-old was hugging me even more than when I was home. He wanted me to be with him and watch him. Our time together became quality time. I will always be grateful to the SKIP program, it kept my family as a family."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